

Appleby Archaeology Newsletter



Volume 11 Issue 3: Autumn 2008

A Busy Summer

First of all, our apologies to those members disappointed by the cancellation of the planned evening walk to Scordale Mine. Taking note of the rain that had already fallen and the threatening tones of the weather-forecast, our leader, Frank Giecco decided that a visit was impractical on this occasion. Access to the mines is impossible when the Hilton Beck is full and the paths are dangerous when wet. We hope to re-schedule the visit for next year.

This apart, we hope that we have done our bit towards keeping members occupied this summer.

The all-day visit to Vindolanda on July 6th proved extremely popular and was blessed with both sunshine and a light breeze. The latter was extremely helpful in keeping the midges under control. We were met by Andrew Birley, as promised, and were given a resume of last winter's talk and a quick introduction to the layout of the site. The summer excavation programme was in full swing and large areas of the fort interior were seeing daylight for the first time since the fourth century AD. It was a distinct privilege to stand and watch Andrew's father, the venerable Robin Birley, extracting coins and pieces of pottery before our very eyes! The museum is excel-

lent and Vindolanda has simply got to be the most exciting "day out" on the Roman Wall. But all this was merely a taster for our own excavation on Brackenber Moor later in July.



Robin Birley welcomes members to Vindolanda

This, of course, turned out to be Appleby Archaeology's finest hour to date, and if you didn't manage to work on the dig itself or to attend the Open Day that followed I'm afraid you missed a great experience! I'll leave it to the participants to give you a flavour of what happened.

So for now, please read on.....

Martin Joyce

The view from Trench 1 (or Three days on the Brackenber Moor.)

If you'd like the scientific details of the recent excavation at Brackenber, don't look here, ask Martin Railton. These are just a few words on what it's like to be a novice digger on an archaeological excavation, hopefully to encourage those of you who have not already had a try to book yourselves in when we start on round two at Brackenber.

Having taken part in the geophysical survey in the spring, for me it was essential to be involved with the excavation once we had managed to obtain some funding from the CWAAS. So, when Martin had decided to go for National Archaeology Week and called for volunteers, it was simply a matter of deciding on which days I could attend. I find that weekends are the easiest for me to fit in, so I checked myself in for both days on the first weekend and also the final (and open) day, or, as I later discovered, the clearing up day.

July 12th dawned bright and sunny and having prepared my victuals the night before, it was just a matter of throwing every conceivable useable article of mucky and/or waterproof clothing into the van and getting on the road. I was of course the last to arrive just after the appointed o'clock of nine, but without further ado, we were all shuttled down to the luxury style static caravan which was to be the base for the week. We were assured by the pro-

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fessionals amongst us that such opulence was extremely unusual in the digging game so we professed our thanks to Martin for organising this combination lounge, shelter, tea bar, toilet and boot store.

After our introductory instruction and cup of tea, (beautifully prepared throughout the weekend by Mike) it was off to the site, the Druidical Judgement Seat or DJS as we soon learned to call it. The trenches were already marked out, so it was all hands to the shovels to lift the turf at Trench 1, stacking it onto sheets of plastic. Various other horticultural implements appeared from the seemingly endless recesses of Martin's Mitsubishi - trowels, sieves, buckets, together with other, less recognisable articles.

There followed a practical trowelling demonstration for us new recruits. For those few of you not in the know, the trowel is used as a kind of big razor blade, scraping off a few millimetres of soil at a time to ensure that nothing important is disturbed from its context. This is undoubtedly reason No. 1 why digs take so long to execute. Reason No. 2 is that absolutely every particle of soil must be sieved to ensure that no tiny artefacts are missed. Furthermore, when a trench is of any length, the buckets of soil from one area must not be mixed up with any other buckets because again, the context might be different.

So, picture this, something you don't often see in *Time Team*™: two trowellers/hand shovellers filling buckets with scrapings from the trench, a bucket mover/siever taking full buckets to the sieving department, and returning empties, and a full time siever shaking away making sure that the soil dropped onto the plastic sheet and also ensuring that those little bits left in the sieve were just bits of stone and not some-



Excavating the ditch : photo North Pennines Archaeology

thing more valuable. Meanwhile, the pile of sieved earth just got bigger and bigger...

More than once I found myself thanking providence that we were excavating in the free draining sandstone soils of the Eden Valley and not (for example) wet and claggy London Clay.

As the various levels were cleared, in came our professionals to take photographs of the trench, measure absolute heights of various points in the excavation against a site reference with a level, and to make scaled drawings of the contents, all of which we novices were trained to do. In the case of trench 1, the contents consisted of a number of large pebbles, which may have been part of the remains of a bank. (Trench 1 sliced through a section of the remains of the earthen bank which encloses the DJS.) All this went on for some while, punctuated by shouts of 'tea break' or 'lunch' at the appropriate points, whereupon everyone downed tools and retired to the caravan.

Meanwhile, the trench 2 team,

located above a possible feature which had showed up on the geophysical survey, had been doing rather similar work. However, they had been having decidedly more luck in the finds department. Quite early on, shouts of 'flint!' were heard and indeed this was the first of a number of pieces of worked flint which were found in that trench. This gave us trench 1 boys and girls new heart and we set to with a will. Unfortunately trench 1 was never so productive and apart from a few fragments of suspect flints, produced hardly any artefacts. However, as always, it did provide information.

The team in trench 2 also produced the find of the week on day 1, a fragment of pottery, which might just be Iron Age. That would be a very exciting prospect and a genuine reward for everyone who worked on the site.

I returned to the DJS the following weekend, to work on the open day and to help with the clearing up. The week's finds were nicely displayed, together with two prehistoric querns which had been found elsewhere on the farm by the

farmer's family in previous years, indicating clear evidence of long occupation on the site.

After a final few hours of excavation, with a gallery of (mostly) familiar faces for part of the time, it was time to stop and put everything back. Fortunately, the land-owner had agreed to use his back hoe to do most of the backfilling – I still wonder how long it would have taken using shovels! Once the backfilling was complete it remained only to solve the jigsaw that was the rectangles of turf. They all went back somewhere, although I rather doubt that they were in their original location.

I really enjoyed the time I spent on the site, knowing that everyone there was working together to discover something actually brand new about the ancient history of the eastern boundaries of Westmorland.

And, I'll be back for round 2! See you there?

Richard Stevens

Brackenber Moor : The Director's Report

Phase 1 of the evaluation at the Druidical Judgement Seat is now complete thanks to all the hard work of members of the group and the public during National Archaeology Week 2008. We made excellent progress during the week, and I hope everyone enjoyed themselves, as well as learning new fieldwork skills. But the work doesn't stop with the fieldwork! All our finds, soil samples, drawings and records now need to be assessed, and specialists consulted, to produce a report on the excavation. This is a summary of what we can say so far....

For those who have not visited the site, The Druidical Judgement Seat is a D-shaped enclosure occupying a headland on the edge of Brackenber Moor. The earthwork was believed to be the site of a Romano-British or Iron Age farmstead, but we now have good evidence that it is a Bronze Age site! All the sieving carried

out during the week really produced results, and we now have an impressive selection of flint tools and waste flakes of probable Bronze Age date, as well as a single sherd of pottery. These will be sent to specialists for dating, but the initial assessment, and lack of finds from later periods, really points to the site being a Bronze Age settlement. This has important implications for other similar sites in the Eden Valley, previously assumed to be Iron Age or later.

We excavated three out of the four trenches, originally planned. These included a trench across the inner bank of the earthwork, which revealed the core bank material and a posthole, suggesting the enclosure originally had a fence around it. Two other postholes discovered in this trench appear to be later in date. A small trench within the enclosure revealed an occupation layer, comprising a crude cobbled surface and a sherd of pottery. An L-shaped trench was also excavated across the enclosure bank and ditch to examine these in



Open Day at the Druidical Judgement Seat : July 19th 2008



profile. This trench also targeted an anomaly shown on the geophysical survey carried out last year. It revealed an alignment of stones, suggesting internal division of the enclosure. The ditch also revealed several distinct fills (although these were quite hard to distinguish!), one of which contained a large number of burned cobbles, probably used as 'pot-boilers'. We did not reach the bottom of the ditch, due to the lack of time and the unsafe depth of the trench. However, as we now have funding for a second week of the excavation, it is hoped that this trench will be re-examined and widened, in order to determine the full depth of the feature. We also have our fourth trench to excavate at the enclosure entrance, and we may well find important archaeological deposits in the ditch terminus, traditionally a location of significance to prehistoric people.

Further permissions will be required to enable us to do all this and, as it is now rather late in the year and members might not enjoy digging in the snow, the second week has now been scheduled for next year. More fun is then guaranteed!

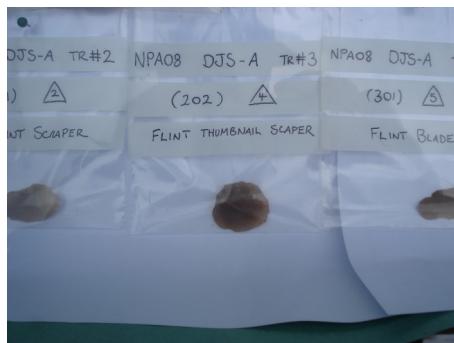


Home sweet home : the diggers' caravan

The week was concluded with an Open Day, to share our discoveries with the public. Approximately 30 people attended, including the new County Archaeologist for Cumbria, Mark Brennand. Kevin Mounsey kindly gave a talk about the excava-

tion to save my voice (having suffered from a throat infection during the project), then visitors were invited to examine the finds back at our caravan HQ.

I'm grateful to all the participants for their hard work and perseverance on a site which was quite difficult to interpret (prehistoric archaeology being notorious in this respect), and to my colleagues from North Pennines Archaeology for keeping things going during my illness.



A selection of flint tools from the DJS

Thanks also to Margaret and Tom Brass at Espland Farm for providing the caravan, which was a godsend, and for helping to backfill the trenches on the last day.

An update on the project will be provided at the AGM, and I hope to see you all back there next year!

Martin Railton

Autumn Programme

Crannogs and Marine Archaeology

Tuesday 9th September

Thomas Whitbread, North Pennines Archaeology

Update on Archaeology in the North West

Tuesday 14th October

Mark Brennand, Senior Historic Environment Officer Cumbria County Council

Recent Finds from Cumbria

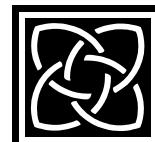
Tuesday 11th November

Dot Bruns, Finds Liaison Officer (Lancashire and Cumbria)

Forensic Archaeology

Tuesday 9th December

Professor Charlotte A Roberts, (Durham University)



SENDER:

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